

# THE FACES OF IMMIGRATION IN MERCER COUNTY

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## **PREFACE**

Immigration has become the great social and civil rights issue of our time. The sheer numbers of recent immigrants, many of them illegal, would be enough to create new tensions in American society. But since 9/11, Americans have also come to feel more anxious about strangers in our midst, and with a stalled economy and stagnant or falling incomes, many people are now more insecure about their economic prospects. These are not auspicious circumstances for bringing out our most generous impulses or our traditions of political compromise and practical legislation. At the national level, the political divisions over immigration became so sharp and shrill in the past year that Congress gave up trying to reform national policy. Partly as a result, some of the issues surrounding immigration are defaulting to the states and localities, regardless of whether they are adequately equipped to deal with the problems.

Like many other parts of the nation, Mercer County has experienced a surge of immigration in recent years that poses fundamental challenges in the schools, health care, social services, housing, criminal justice and other fields. The Sandra Starr Foundation shared the sense of many in the region that these challenges have been increasing, but the exact dimensions were unclear. As a result, we asked New Jersey Policy Perspective to produce a definitive report that could clarify the scale and character of immigration in the county and illuminate the issues

faced by local and state governments, private institutions and the immigrant communities themselves.

This report confirms the exceptional growth in the local immigrant population. For example, between 2000 and 2006, while the number of immigrants in New Jersey as a whole increased by 14 percent, the number of immigrants in Mercer County grew by 48 percent — far more than the five percent increase in the county's overall population. The best estimates available suggest that just over one-quarter of the county's 71,000 immigrants are in the United States illegally, but many of them are parents of children who were born in this country. As a result, the welfare of the children, who are U.S. citizens, depends on adults who have no legal rights, live in constant fear and may be exploited and abused with impunity by employers and others. At the same time, they provide services and labor that have been vital to the county's prosperity.

We hope this report provides a factual basis for local and state leaders and members of the public to think through the challenges related to immigration. Some of those challenges can only be dealt with through action by Congress. But even with the best possible national legislation, there is much that can and must be done at the local level. Mercer County ought to be a model for such efforts.

— *Paul Starr*  
*President, Sandra Starr Foundation*



## INTRODUCTION: PEOPLE AND PLACES

In 2001, Jorge left his parents and six siblings in Guatemala. Cramped in the back of a pickup truck, he crossed into Mexico and then entered the United States. In Trenton, he shared a two-bedroom apartment with seven others, doing landscaping work and sending as much money as he could home to Guatemala to help his family pay for food, school fees and medical bills.

With the help of a good immigration lawyer Jorge was granted asylum, which is not uncommon for people from areas with political violence. Today, he has a green card. He owns his own landscaping business, and is married with two children. Money is tight. Even the most affordable child care, offered at the local YMCA, is expensive. So his children stay with his wife's mother during the day. The family sometimes relies on food from a local church pantry. Medication for the grandmother strains the budget. The family lives in a relatively safe neighborhood. Their oldest daughter, Jennifer, is thriving in kindergarten and, with their papers in order, they are less fearful than many of their neighbors about the periodic raids by immigration authorities that throw their neighborhood into upheaval.

Madhvi's experience has been very different. Arriving in the United States from Bombay in 1990, she met her husband at the Midwestern university where she earned her Ph.D. in biochemistry. Swapping her student visa for one available to workers with specialized skills, Madhvi found employment at a pharmaceutical company in Mercer County. For a while, she commuted from their home in Jersey City.

Now, Madhvi and her husband are U.S. citizens. Their oldest son, Vikram, is a math enthusiast who recently earned a National Merit Scholarship. After graduation from high school, he hopes to attend MIT or Cornell. Ram, their eighth grader, plays the French horn in the school band and excels in art and languages. They live in an upscale neighborhood in West Windsor. Though they worry about crime and the cost of college, they are happy in their home.

Many Mercer County residents know someone like Jorge or Madhvi. Mercer County, like much of the United States, is experiencing a wave of immigration rivaling in size and scope those of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Those earlier immigrants changed America, its history and its culture. This report

shows how the 21st century immigration boom already affects everyday lives of county residents, as well as the economy, schools, law enforcement and social services systems.

- Mercer-based Roma Bank, which has served generations of Italian immigrants, has opened RomAsia to serve the financial needs of Asian customers.
- When *Trentonian* columnist Jack Knarr went recently to his favorite Italian hot dog-joint in Chambersburg, the heart of Trenton's Italian-American community, he found it filled with the sounds of people speaking in Spanish. The restaurant now offers beans and rice, plantains and yucca along with Italian hotdogs. And, reported Knarr, "all the Sinatra paintings are gone from the walls."
- Thanks to the efforts of Isles, Inc., a Trenton-based community group whose activities include promoting urban gardening, once-vacant lots now yield cilantro, chili peppers and other Latin American favorites in carefully tended vegetable gardens.
- Two of the top seven boys' high school tennis players in the region as ranked by the *Star-Ledger* last season were Junjiro Mori and Pray Sekar, doubles partners for West Windsor South.
- Dan-el Padilla, an undocumented immigrant from the Dominican Republic, received his Bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 2006, graduating with a 3.9 grade point average. A classics major, Padilla, who was brought to the United States as a toddler, delivered the graduation address — in Latin.

Anecdotes such as these abound, as do emotions. But getting a totally accurate demographic handle on immigrants in Mercer County, or any county in the nation, is difficult. It's hard to pin down even basic statistics, such as the number of foreign-born men and women in a certain community, the dollar value of their contributions to the local economy and the cost of providing them with education, health care and other services they use. Schools, hospitals and other institutions don't ask about immigration status. Employers often don't want to know. U.S. Census figures with municipal-level data are disputed.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

To prepare this report, New Jersey Policy Perspective analyzed data from the U.S. Census Bureau, state agencies, labor unions and many other sources. In some instances, statistics on race, ethnicity and English proficiency are employed as rough stand-ins for immigration data. Though not always conclusive, they can provide valuable clues.

What emerges is a vivid, nuanced, sometimes disturbing and sometimes inspiring portrait of a county in the throes of change. Mercer doesn't have the most immigrants among New Jersey counties. That distinction goes to Hudson and Essex. But the county draws immigrants from all corners of the world, some with graduate degrees and some who left school after third grade. Mercer County, best-known as home to the state capital and to Princeton University, offers them a variety of housing, job and educational opportunities, including inner-city Trenton neighborhoods and sprawling middle- and upper-class suburbs, high-tech research labs and countless restaurants, retail stores and other service businesses.

Two facts dominate the survey. The number of immigrants in Mercer County is large, and growing. And — in a major difference from previous waves of immigration — the number of illegal immigrants is also large, and also growing. Some highlights:

- Almost 20 percent of Mercer County's 376,000 residents were born outside the United States — some 71,000 people.
- The number of immigrants in Mercer County grew by 48 percent from 2000 to 2006, compared to overall county population growth of five percent.
- The percentage of immigrants in Mercer County is very significant by national standards, higher than statewide averages everywhere but California and New York State.
- Latinos make up the largest share of Mercer County's immigrants, at 36 percent. Asians represent another 32 percent. The percentage of European immigrants has been decreasing. So, to a lesser extent, has the percentage of African immigrants.
- Students in Mercer County schools speak an astonishing 87 different languages, including Spanish, Mandarin, Haitian Creole, Gujarati and Telugu (languages spoken in India) and Polish.
- As many as 29 percent of Mercer's 71,000 immigrants are estimated to live in the U.S. illegally. At least 20,000 undocumented immigrants — perhaps more than 40 percent — are believed to be Latinos.
- The presence of undocumented immigrants appears to have grown dramatically. In one congressional district that includes part of Mercer County, the number grew by 47 percent from 2000 to 2005. In another Mercer County district, the increase appears to be 131 percent.
- In contrast to policies and rhetoric reported in other New Jersey communities and elsewhere in the nation, some municipal officials in Mercer — Hightstown, Trenton and Princeton, for example — have been especially welcoming to immigrants, both legal and undocumented. Federal and state guidance, which could lead to uniform policies, is lacking.
- Among Mercer's immigrant population some 5,500 people live below the federal poverty line, about the same percentage as for the county as a whole.
- Among Latino immigrants, 20 percent have less than a ninth grade education and only 25 percent have a high school diploma. One in three Asian immigrants has a bachelor's degree. Of these, 40 percent have advanced graduate degrees.
- Although English language skills are critical, a scattershot approach pervades public school systems and adult education. Many school districts use waivers to avoid offering courses in students' native language. A patchwork of adult courses is offered by local libraries, nonprofits and Mercer County College. Many courses are expensive, require proof of legal status or are otherwise inaccessible.
- Immigrants in Mercer County are affected by New Jersey's imposing tighter restrictions in some areas than some other states. Only legal immigrants are eligible for coverage by the state health insurance program, for example. New Jersey

requires undocumented state residents to pay high out-of-state tuition rates to attend public colleges. And New Jersey requires a Social Security number to receive a driver’s license — effectively barring undocumented immigrants from driving legally.

- Immigrants are half as likely to have health insurance as the native-born. But this varies greatly according to area of origin. Four of five Asian immigrants are insured.
- Because of their well-known fear of authorities, undocumented immigrants are often victims of criminal activity that ranges from “notarios” posing as immigration lawyers to street thugs.

**WHO ARE MERCER’S IMMIGRANTS?**

**Size of Immigrant Population**

Mercer County today is immigrant-rich. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, immigrants account for 19 percent — or 71,000 — of residents in Mercer’s 13 municipalities. According to the 2006 ACS, 32 percent of the foreign-born in Mercer County have come to the United States since 2000, and 65 percent since 1990.

These recent arrivals to Mercer represent only the latest players in a centuries-long drama. “Few states,” contends one historian, “have been so continuously shaped and reshaped by immigration.”<sup>1</sup>

Of New Jersey’s 21 counties, Mercer ranks 12th in population. Yet it is eighth in terms of the percentage of the population that is foreign born.

**Place of Origin**

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, most immigrants to Mercer County, and to New Jersey and the nation as a whole, came from Europe. This movement peaked in 1910, when im-

**IMMIGRANTS IN NEW JERSEY COUNTIES**

	Total Population	Foreign Born	Rank of Percent Foreign Born
Bergen	904,037	28%	5
Middlesex	786,971	28	3
Essex	786,147	24	6
Monmouth	635,285	13	11
Hudson	601,146	41	1
Ocean	562,335	8	17
Union	531,088	30	2
Camden	517,001	10	12
Passaic	497,093	28	4
Morris	493,160	19	9
Burlington	450,627	9	14
<b>Mercer</b>	<b>367,605</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>8</b>
Somerset	324,186	21	7
Gloucester	282,031	5	19
Atlantic	271,620	15	10
Cumberland	154,823	10	13
Sussex	153,384	6	18
Hunterdon	130,783	9	15
Warren	110,919	9	16
Cape May	97,724	3	21
Salem	66,595	4	20
New Jersey	8,724,560	20%	

SOURCE: U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2006

migrants accounted for more than 25 percent of New Jersey’s population.<sup>2</sup> Today, just over one in five (22 percent) of the county’s immigrant population originated in Europe, slightly above the New Jersey rate of 19 percent. By contrast, in Ocean County, where the immigrant population is low, Europeans still dominate, making up 38 percent of all immigrants.

But as European immigrants age and the pace of immigration from elsewhere accelerates, a shift is under way. Fewer immigrants come to Mercer County from Europe and, to a lesser extent, from Africa than even three years ago. Conversely, the share of Latin Americans and Asians is growing.

It should be noted that Census data on the national origin of Hispanics and possibly other immigrants are notoriously flawed, in part because some people are reluctant to be counted. Year-to-year comparisons are of dubious value because data collection is better in some years than in others.<sup>3</sup>

**ORIGIN OF MERCER'S FOREIGN BORN**

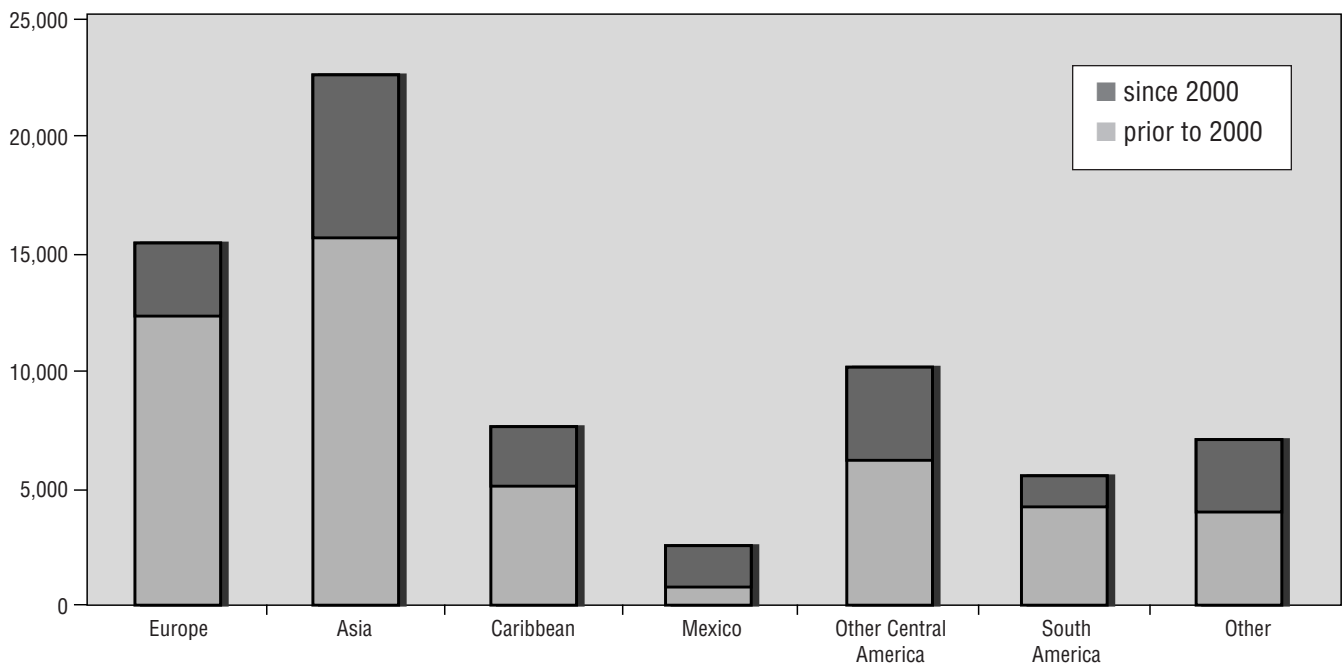
	2003	2006
Latin America	29%	36%
Europe	26%	22%
Asia	30%	32%
Africa	14%	8%

SOURCE: Compiled from U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2003 and 2006

Demographers point to New Jersey as a model of immigrant diversity.<sup>4</sup> Mercer fits this description. The largest share of immigrants — 36 percent — comes from Latin America. One of every three — 32 percent — of immigrants in Mercer comes from Asia, a slightly larger share than the statewide average of 30 percent, though far below neighboring counties such as Middlesex, where 49 percent of immigrants are Asian-born.

As the chart below shows, a sizeable number of immigrants living in Mercer County come from other regions, principally Europe and Central and South America.

**Mercer's Most Recent Immigrants by Region of Origin and Period of Entry**



SOURCE: U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2006.

**Diversity of Languages**

About 55,000 persons, or 21 percent of Mercer County residents, speak a language other than English at home. About half of these speak Spanish, according to the U.S. Census 2006 American Community Survey. The next most prominent language spoken in homes is Italian, with nearly 4,500. More than 4,000 speak Chinese at home and nearly 3,500 Polish. Others spoken with notable frequency are: French (including the Creole version spoken in Haiti), German, Korean, languages of India and Russian as well as other Slavic languages.

**Changes in Latino Population**

Since the first significant population of Puerto Ricans arrived in Mercer County after World War II, this group has been steadily edged out by Central and South Americans, a shift that continues today. This is evident in the years between 2003 and 2006, for example, when Puerto Rican natives in Mercer went from 47 percent to 34 percent of the county’s Latino population.

Diverse groups of Latino immigrants live in every Mercer municipality, with more than half in Trenton.

**LATINOS IN MERCER COUNTY**

	Latino Population	% of Mercer Latinos	Predominant Origin
Trenton	18,391	54%	Puerto Rico
Hamilton	4,471	13	Puerto Rico
East Windsor	3,559	10	Ecuador
Ewing	1,586	5	Puerto Rico
Lawrence	1,344	4	Puerto Rico
Hightstown	1,046	3	Ecuador
Princeton Bor.	1,009	3	Mexico
West Windsor	892	3	Mexico
Princeton Twp.	847	2	Mexico
Hopewell Twp.	395	1	Puerto Rico
Robbinsville	279	1	Puerto Rico
Hopewell Bor.	47	<1	Guatemala
Pennington	32	<1	Colombia

SOURCE: Lillian Escobar-Haskins, “Latinos in Mercer County: A Reflection of the Changing Latino Population in the Northeast,” United Way of Greater Mercer County, 2004

To an extent, the Mercer immigrant story is the New Jersey immigrant story: diverse and numerous. Less than three percent of the U.S.-born population lives in New Jersey, but 4.5 percent of the nation’s foreign-born make their homes in the state.<sup>5</sup>

But there are some interesting differences. From 2000 to 2006, Mercer’s population has grown by five percent, while the number of immigrants has expanded by 48 percent. For the same period, the state’s immigrant population grew by 14 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of Latinos living in Mercer has risen by 32 percent. Despite this current wave, recent Census data show that 16 percent of New Jerseyans are Latino as compared to 12 percent of Mercer residents.

**A PRIMER ON IMMIGRATION TERMS**

**Alien** — A person living in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen.

**Green Card** — The popular name for the Alien Registration Receipt Card, given to immigrants who become legal permanent residents of the United States. The card was once green, but now is pink.

**Permanent Resident Status** — Category of those allowed to live permanently in the U.S., as an immigrant rather than a full citizen. Available to those with special skills or an offer of permanent employment, those granted political asylum or meeting certain other conditions. Must meet quota requirements for job occupation and country of birth.

**Citizenship** — Next step beyond permanent resident status. Provides maximum rights. Available to those who have lived in the U.S. legally for five years with no extended absences, who can demonstrate knowledge of the U.S. Constitution and pass a citizenship test. Sample questions from test offered after October 2008: What did Susan B. Anthony do? Name your U.S. Representative. Name one war fought by the United States after 1900.

**Illegal Immigrant** — Also known as **undocumented immigrant**. A person living in the United States in violation of immigration law, often because of entering illegally, or remaining after expiration of temporary visa.

**Mixed Status** — Families that include at least one member who is in the United States illegally, and children who are born in the U.S. and thus under law are full citizens. Such families face a high risk of children being separated by authorities from parents or other relatives.



## ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

### Numbers in Mercer

Jeffrey Passel, a demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington DC, estimates that, as of 2004, approximately 350,000 undocumented persons resided in New Jersey.<sup>6</sup> One year later, according to the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an anti-immigration group, the state's illegal population was 358,000, ninth highest in the country.

Pew's statistics, the Census and other sources indicate that there might be upwards of 20,000 undocumented immigrants in Mercer County today. According to the Census, the 2006 non-citizen population of Mercer County was 44,000. If national proportions hold true for Mercer, then roughly half of these persons are undocumented. This would represent slightly more than a quarter, or 28 percent, of the county's total of 71,000 immigrants.

### Who are the Undocumented?

Most of Mercer's undocumented immigrants are Latinos. According to an estimate by one local activist, more than 40 percent of the county's Latino population is undocumented.<sup>7</sup> As many as half of all young Latino families are of "mixed" status. This means that some family members lack legal authorization to live in the U.S, but others, typically children, are citizens by virtue of being born in the U.S. Across the country, similar situations exist. The result is that the well-being of millions of U.S. citizens depends on the welfare of their undocumented parents.

More than other immigrants, the undocumented tend to be young, to live in families and to be employed. Education levels are generally low, as are incomes. Poverty rates are high and the percentage of the foreign born covered by insurance is well below the statewide average. Their legal status not only weighs them down in the struggle to climb out of poverty, but it also keeps them from accessing the very systems intended to ease some of the hardships facing low-income families.

### Illegal Immigration Growing in Mercer

For reasons that are not clear, the number of undocumented in Mercer County has grown in recent years — posing serious issues for policymakers. The federal Department of Homeland

Security recently estimated the number of undocumented residents by congressional district. From 2000 to 2005, a period when the national undocumented population statewide grew 23 percent, Mercer County's undocumented population increased at a substantially higher rate.

In the 4th Congressional District, which includes the Mercer County municipalities of East Windsor, Hamilton, Hightstown, Robbinsville and part of Trenton, the number of undocumented grew from 13,000 to 30,000, or 131 percent, between 2000 and 2005. Over the same period in the 12th District, which includes Ewing, Hopewell Borough and Township, Lawrence, Pennington, Princeton Borough and Township, West Windsor and part of Trenton, the number of undocumented grew from 15,000 to 22,000 or 47 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Another indication that the number of undocumented in the county is increasing is the rise in the number of Mercer residents with Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers. The Internal Revenue Service issues ITINs to residents without regard to their legal status, and foreign nationals lacking green cards or work visas sometimes get them both to adhere to U.S. law and to create a paper trail to document their economic contributions. The number of ITIN filings in Mercer County nearly tripled, from 749 in 2000 to 2,145 in 2004, with the largest share assigned to residents of a single south Trenton zip code, an area heavily settled in recent years by Guatemalan immigrants.

### Climate of Fear

Fear of being deported by federal agents haunts many of Mercer's undocumented immigrants as well as their U.S.-born children and family members. The fears often are well founded. Neighborhood talk, reports in the local and national press and a complaint recently filed by the Center for Social Justice at Seton Hall Law School and other plaintiffs against the federal Department of Homeland Security all bring into focus what the complaint calls "a troubling pattern by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) teams" in and around Mercer County.<sup>9</sup> Immigration and Customs Enforcement is the largest investigative branch of the Department of Homeland Security.

Since 2004, these federal ICE teams have targeted immigrant communities in Hightstown, Princeton, Ewing, West Windsor and Trenton. Operating without warrants, they scour neighbor-



hoods looking for immigrants with outstanding deportation orders.

The legal filing alleges:

In a typical raid, multiple immigration agents surround a house and pound on the front door, announcing themselves as “police.” In the belief that there is an emergency, an occupant opens the door. The immigration agents (often armed) then enter the home, without a search warrant and without securing informed consent for their entry. They move through the home in an intimidating manner, wake all occupants including children, and make them gather in a central location. The agents often announce that they are looking for an individual who is unknown to the occupants of the home, and proceed to question the occupants and arrest anyone they suspect of having an unlawful presence in the United States.

Not all of those subjected to the raids are undocumented. Fewer still have defied outstanding orders of deportation (a criminal, as opposed to civil violation). In many cases, the complaint alleges, citizens and lawful permanent residents get caught up in the sweeps.<sup>10</sup> Press reports describe children looking on in horror as their father or mother is hauled away in handcuffs.

Since 2006, ICE has ratcheted up its efforts to arrest and deport immigrants. Four of the nation’s 75 Fugitive Operation Teams now work in New Jersey. Under “Operation Return to Sender,” each team is expected to apprehend 1,000 fugitives per year. Arrests nearly doubled, from 1,094 in 2006 to 2,079 in 2007. Of those arrested in 2007, most (1,809) had no criminal history.<sup>11</sup>

### **Mercer Officials Welcoming**

In some parts of New Jersey and the nation, local officials have displayed strong hostility to immigrants. Morristown’s mayor has proposed that police verify the immigration status of anyone stopped for even routine traffic violations. The town has applied to the Department of Homeland Security for permission to train local police officers to enforce federal immigration law. Morristown was also the scene of a violent melee last summer when anti- and pro-immigration forces clashed at a rally. Five persons were arrested and two injured.

Local authorities in Riverside (Burlington County) and Hazleton, PA, as well as state law enforcement officials in Arizona have established penalties for employers and landlords doing business with undocumented immigrants. In February 2008, New Jersey’s State Senate majority leader introduced a similar bill. Although it is not expected to gain a foothold, it represents a viewpoint that many individuals support. For example, in Bogota (Bergen County), the then-mayor sued McDonald’s after the fast food chain refused his demand to remove a Spanish-language billboard in the borough.

In sharp contrast, some Mercer municipalities have developed creative and effective ways to minimize the harassment and exploitation of immigrants.

Trenton Mayor Douglas Palmer signed an executive order affirming immigrants’ right to city services. And in early 2008, a coalition of religious congregations and civic associations joined the Trenton Police Department and the public schools to sponsor a series of information and outreach activities for immigrants. The programs cover such topics as parent-school communication, worker rights, consumer protection laws, public safety and procedures for appearing in traffic court. At one gathering, the Fire Department distributed free smoke detectors.

In Princeton Township, the council has passed a resolution barring local police from asking residents about their immigration status and from participating in federal raids. The Princeton-based Latin American Legal Defense and Education Foundation (LALDEF) has partnered with other local agencies to offer a range of programs for immigrants, regardless of their legal status. At a recent bike-safety clinic offered in conjunction with the local police, residents who make their way home from restaurant jobs bicycling along Mercer’s dark roads received free bike lights. Other clinics pair locals with tax preparers and immigration lawyers.

In Hightstown, Mayor Robert Patten and the council have worked closely with local immigrants, who are mostly Ecuadorian. In 2005, Hightstown passed a resolution declaring that cooperating with local authorities is safe for immigrants, even those who are undocumented.

Some initiatives transcend municipal boundaries. In the spring of 2008, the LALDEF, with the Womanspace domestic violence shelter, Legal Services of New Jersey and the Children's Home Society presented the first Trenton Family Law Clinic. There, immigration and family lawyers met with indigent immigrant clients free of charge. Haitian Creole, Portuguese, Polish and Spanish translators were present.

Around the nation, some municipalities also have taken what could be described as positive steps to help immigrants become part of the mainstream. New Haven, for example, issues city resident cards certifying access to public facilities. The city also holds its own workshops to assist illegal immigrants filing federal income taxes. New York City's Immigration Service Provider Law protects immigrants seeking immigration services and provides anonymous reporting of violators. New York's Equal Access to Human Services Act of 2003 strengthens language access services for limited-English-proficient persons seeking critical health and human services.

### Impact of State Policies

States, as well as municipalities, set policies with regard to immigrants. There are numerous examples of states using their discretionary powers to take a more pro-immigrant approach than New Jersey.

- New York, Massachusetts, Illinois and Rhode Island are among states that allow all immigrant children to receive medical care under the state health insurance program, regardless of family income. New Jersey allows only legal immigrants who meet income standards.
- Utah, New Mexico and Illinois are some of the states that allow residents to get driver's licenses no matter what is their legal status, by using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number issued by the IRS to those without Social Security numbers. New Jersey requires a Social Security number.
- Nine states, including California, Texas, New York, Illinois and Florida, allow undocumented students who have graduated from state high schools to pay in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities. New Jersey requires undocumented state residents to pay the higher out-of-state rate.

## SOCIAL ISSUES

### Health Care Often a Problem

When immigrants in Mercer County get sick they are less likely than the native-born to have health insurance. Statewide, immigrants are roughly half as likely as their native-born counterparts to have health insurance. Asians are the only exception: four out of five have insurance.<sup>12</sup>

U.S. Justice Department officials have noted that immigrants' lack of access to health services creates "significant, negative public health consequences across the country." The inability to get necessary medical and other benefits causes harm to immigrants and puts the health of the general public at risk.<sup>13</sup>

Legal immigrants and the native-born children of undocumented immigrants qualify for means-tested health care programs if their income is low enough. Such programs include Medicaid and FamilyCare, New Jersey's version of the nationwide State Children's Health Insurance Program. Yet the rate of enrollment among immigrant families tends to be much lower than it could be.<sup>14</sup> Groups like the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, representing a coalition of immigrants' rights groups statewide, have worked to enroll more immigrants in Mercer and beyond. Language barriers as well as a lack of knowledge of available government programs are obstacles to overcome.

Lacking a "medical home," a reliable and affordable place at which to access care, many low-income immigrants live in the shadows of Mercer County's health care system. Often, they seek medical attention furtively or desperately, with little emphasis on preventive care — a route that is costly not just in dollars spent, but in terms of individual and public health. A recent national study by the Harvard Medical School revealed that children of immigrants received roughly one quarter as much care as classmates with U.S.-born parents. Even Medicaid-eligible immigrant children did not get regular check-ups and seldom, if ever, went to a hospital.<sup>15</sup>

Precise data are hard to find. The Congressional Budget Office in 1992 attempted to calculate the extent to which immigrants receive health care but ultimately abandoned the effort. A survey by the New Jersey Hospital Association found highly inaccurate reporting, especially for Latinos.<sup>16</sup> The group estimates

that uninsured and undocumented immigrants cost the state's 81 hospitals between \$275 million and \$300 million in 2007 — nearly two percent of the \$14 billion spent on patient care each year. There is no reason to expect the pattern in Mercer County to differ significantly from the overall New Jersey picture.

Part of the problem is that federal and state support is not keeping up with rising costs. Since federal Medicaid legislation passed in 2004, New Jersey and other states with large immigrant populations have received funds for their care. But under a formula based on the number of undocumented immigrants apprehended annually, New Jersey's share has been frozen at \$5.3 million per year. One hospital administrator said the amount is but "a spit in the bucket"<sup>17</sup> compared to what is needed.

Many low-income immigrants turn to clinic-based settings for social and health services. A quarter of the patients seen at the Henry J. Austin Clinic, Trenton's only federally qualified health clinic, are Latino. Their most frequent diagnoses are diabetes and hypertension — diseases often associated by medical professionals with poverty.

Other service-providers such as Womanspace, Planned Parenthood of the Mercer Area, and the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK) say they have made program and staffing adjustments to meet the needs of Mercer's growing immigrant population. According to Dennis Micai, TASK's director, indigent residents will eat more than 30,000 meals this year at Trenton's First Baptist Church and the Divine Mercy Parish. Most of TASK's immigrant clients are Latino, but Poles and Ukrainians are also regulars.

Because many immigrants live in mixed status households, some are anxious about seeking help. For immigrants, seemingly innocuous details can create unnecessary hurdles. For example, the website for Mercer County's Office of Addiction Services uses the word "citizen" to describe who is eligible for treatment. Actually, citizenship has no bearing on eligibility. But instances like this can have serious implications, perhaps even deterring those who need help from seeking it.<sup>18</sup>

### Many Miss Out on Child Care Assistance

Low-income immigrant families that have been in the U.S. for more than 10 years may qualify for state assistance with child care through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and other sources. Families with higher incomes may qualify for aid through the Mercer County Child Care Voucher Program. Currently, close to 3,000 families receive this assistance. But Nancy Thompson, executive director of the program, notes that few immigrant families apply. As many as 10 immigrant parents walk into the agency's offices each week, many speaking accented English or none at all. But, after learning of the extensive documentation required with any application, Thompson says that most leave and never come back.

Outreach and communication remain the weak links, even though evidence suggests that families respond to such efforts. When the Hispanic Directors Association and the state Department of Human Services began a statewide outreach campaign, they found that 52 percent of immigrant families in Abbott districts (those targeted for additional state aid to address low resources and poor school performance) did not know that no-cost preschool was available to their children. Five years later, outreach had halved the proportion of uninformed parents to 27 percent.<sup>19</sup>

### Cutbacks in Federal Help

A little over a decade ago, legal immigrants also could qualify for many federal means-tested programs as soon as they entered the U.S. In 1996, however, federal policy changed. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act barred legal immigrants during their first five years in the U.S. from such entitlements as Medicaid, TANF and food stamps. They could no longer receive federally backed college loans. Nor could parents receive federal adoption assistance.

In 1997 and 1998, Congress restored some of these benefits, mostly to the elderly and persons with disabilities. Food stamp eligibility returned to a large portion of immigrants, including children, in 2002. Currently, however, many classes of immigrants remain barred from receiving any federal public benefits including, for example, access to financial aid for college.

The ensuing situation has left Mercer immigration lawyers like Tatiana Durbak, who works from her office at La Casita in the basement of the First Hispanic Baptist Church of Trenton, with a tremendous caseload. Most of Durbak’s clients are Latino families seeking to become legal immigrants. But from time to time she has also handled claims for members of Mercer’s substantial Slavic community.<sup>20</sup>

**ECONOMIC AND WORK ISSUES**

New Jersey ranked third in the nation for the number of temporary workers admitted on foreign labor visas for high skill, high demand jobs in 2005-2006. The federal government granted H-1B visas, as they are known, to 67,458 of these workers for employment in New Jersey, placing it behind only California with 117,455 and New York, 69,489.<sup>21</sup>

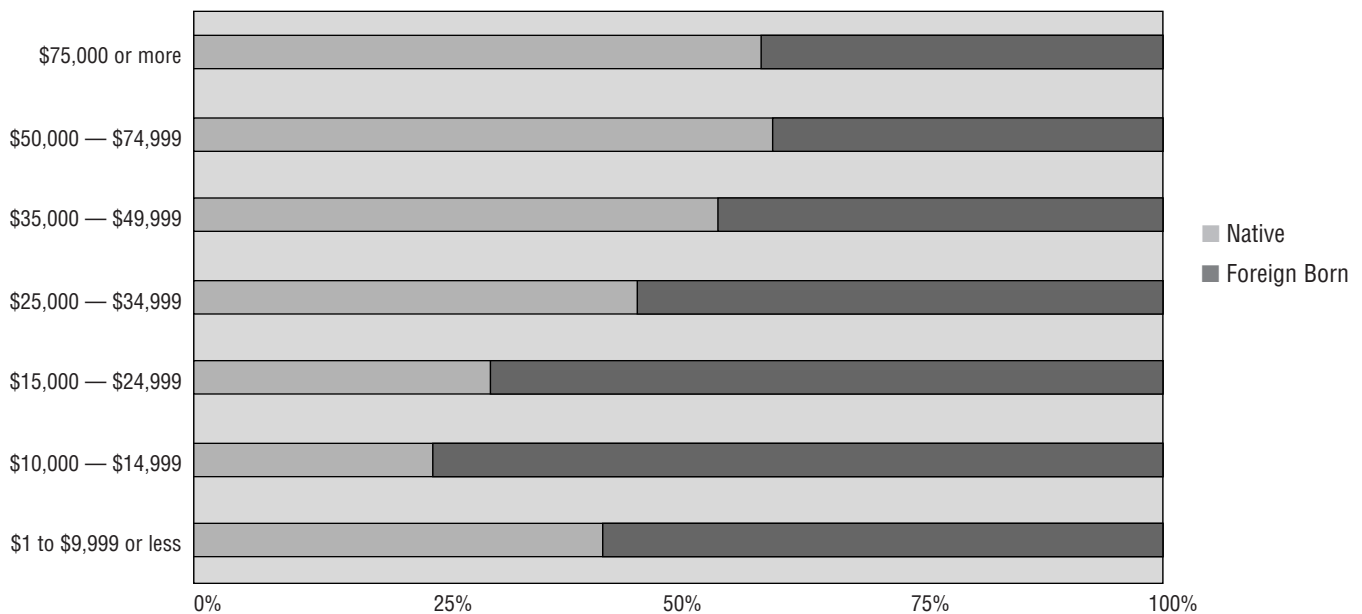
New Jersey is the nation’s second wealthiest state, with median household income reaching nearly \$65,000. Mercer County is relatively wealthy as well, ranked 59th among the nation’s more than 3,000 counties, with just under \$46,000 in per capita personal income.<sup>22</sup> *Forbes* magazine recently ranked Mercer 21st on its list of the best locations for businesses.

Immigrant workers are integral to the county’s appealing package. But not all of the foreign-born share in Mercer’s bounty. As of 2006, about 5,500 immigrants lived below the federal poverty line, which for a family of four was about \$40,000 a year. All in all, immigrants make up about 19 percent of the county’s poorest residents (on par with their representation in the county). However, poverty rates for persons with limited English skills (usually immigrants or the children of immigrants) are higher than for native speakers.

Among the population for which poverty status has been determined, seven percent of those speaking only English were found to be below the federal poverty level, according to the U.S. Census American Community Survey for 2006. By comparison, 11 percent of those speaking any language other than English were in poverty and 16 percent of those speaking Creole or Spanish.

In a distribution that probably holds true for Mercer, statewide data show that on average, immigrants are paid less than their native-born counterparts.

**In New Jersey, Immigrants Are More Likely Earn Less**



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor, The LEP Special Tabulation of Census 2000 Data

Job stratification by race and ethnicity probably explains some of the income distribution. Census tabulations show that half of all service workers in Mercer County are Caucasian, 26 percent African American, 19 percent Latino and three percent Asian.<sup>23</sup>

Differences in education also help explain income disparity. As of 2000, about 20 percent of Latino immigrants in Mercer had less than a ninth-grade education, and another 20 percent had attended some high school. Countywide, 25 percent had a high school diploma. By contrast, one in three Asian residents had a Bachelor's degree and over 40 percent had a graduate or professional degree.

Within ethnic groups, wide variations exist. In 2000, only one percent of Trenton's Latino population had graduate or professional degrees, as compared to more than 25 percent in Princeton.

Likewise, as was often true in the past, certain immigrant groups have established footholds in particular industries. For example, as of 2000, almost all (92 percent) of Mercer's Haitian Creole population worked in service occupations. Nearly half (48 percent) of Chinese speakers had management or professional occupations while about 43 percent of Russian speakers performed construction or maintenance jobs. Groups with longer histories in Mercer County (for example, Polish, Italian and some Latinos) have been able to penetrate a greater number of fields.<sup>24</sup> And for those able to learn English and get an education, more options are available.

### Many Immigrants are Low-Wage Workers

In the late 19th century, Samuel Gompers, founder of the American Federation of Labor (foreign-born himself), defined immigration as "in its fundamental aspects, a labor problem."<sup>25</sup>

Controversy still surrounds the role of immigrants in the labor market. Many immigration opponents argue that immigrants take jobs from the native-born or drive down wages. The undocumented are the focus of much of the criticism. Mercer's immigrant doctors, professors and scientists, many equipped with hard-to-come-by technical skills, are typically not the immigrants under attack.

But, here again hard data is inconclusive and experts disagree about the effect of immigrants willing to work for low pay on

the employment and wages of native workers. Harvard economist George Borjas, for example, contends that the influx of low-skilled immigrants reduces wages of natives. But others, most prominently David Card at the University of California-Berkeley, have found that low-skilled workers easily integrate into the economy and actually help create new, higher-skilled jobs more likely to be filled by native workers.

What is clear is that whole sectors of the Mercer County economy — restaurants and bars, hotels, domestic work, landscaping and janitorial services — rely on low-wage workers. Many, if not most, are immigrants. According to the Service Employees International Union, 90 percent of the janitorial workforce in the New Jersey-New York-Pennsylvania region are foreign born. Carl Nordstrom of the New Jersey Landscapers Association tells a similar story. Without immigrant workers, these and other service industries would probably grind to a halt.

### Regulation of the Low-Wage Workplace is Weak

As the share of immigrants in the low-wage labor force grows, so do allegations of exploitation. The influx of immigrants in the workforce has coincided with waning union strength, nationally and in New Jersey, where union membership declined to 21 percent of all workers in 2000 from 27 percent in 1983. Still, the expansion of the immigrant workforce means that even though the proportion of immigrants belonging to a union is declining, the number of unionized immigrant workers is rising.

Tensions sometimes break out along native/immigrant lines. Bill Mullen, president of the New Jersey State Building and Construction Trades Council, notes the irony. "These trade unions were built by immigrants 75 to 80 years ago," he told *The Record* newspaper of Hackensack. But, as Mullen puts it, "we can't let our wages be driven down."<sup>26</sup>

Over the past few decades, the unregulated workforce has expanded in such occupations as construction, janitorial services and hotel and restaurant work, fields where immigrants constitute a large part of the workforce.<sup>27</sup>

Attorney Keith Talbott, who directs the Migrant Labor Project of Legal Services of New Jersey, says that in Mercer County and elsewhere employers of immigrants routinely violate wage



and hour laws, disregard health and safety standards and subject employees to sexual harassment.

It is probably not a coincidence that as the unregulated workforce has grown, the share of foreign-born victims of work-related accidents statewide has steadily increased, from 23 percent in 1999 to 41 percent in 2005-06. Between 2000 and 2006, nine foreign-born workers died in job-related accidents in Mercer County.<sup>28</sup> In response, some unions have increased safety programs. The New Jersey Building and Construction Trades Council, which represents more than 150,000 workers statewide, has developed an injury prevention campaign in Spanish and English.

Some say that if existing labor laws were enforced more effectively, the worst exploitation of foreign-born workers would be prevented and more native workers might retain their jobs. Professor Janice Fine of Rutgers University points to New Jersey's Construction Industry Independent Contractor Act, which Gov. Jon Corzine signed into law in July 2007. Professor Fine says the law, which targets contractors who misclassify employees as independent contractors in order to avoid paying taxes, is a good example of state action to curb exploitation of both immigrants and U.S.-born workers.<sup>29</sup>

Projections from the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development suggest that, by 2025, the share of Hispanics in Mercer's work force will increase by one-third, while the numbers of persons describing themselves as "other races" or "multiracial" will double and triple respectively. These workers (some of whom are immigrants) will need the skills to move out of the county's lowest paid, lowest skilled jobs.

## EDUCATION

### Immigrants a Major Presence in Mercer County Schools

Enrollment data for 2006-2007 show that out of more than 60,000 students in Mercer County public schools, almost 10,000 spoke one of 87 different foreign languages. Most apparently also spoke English, since fewer than one in four was classified as having Limited English Proficiency (LEP).

Countywide, Spanish speakers are the clear majority among foreign-language speakers, at 58 percent. Two exceptions are

Lawrence, where Polish students dominate among foreign-language speakers, and West Windsor, where students speaking Mandarin and Telugu, a language spoken in India, outnumber Spanish-speakers.

A look at the predominant foreign languages spoken in many Mercer County school districts, compiled from state Department of Education data for 2006-2007, provides a rough guide to where the county's various immigrant groups live:

East Windsor: 45 languages including Spanish, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi  
 Ewing: 31 languages including Spanish, Polish, Creole French, Arabic  
 Hamilton: 46 languages including Spanish, Haitian Creole French, Polish  
 Hopewell: 18 languages including Spanish, Mandarin, French, Urdu  
 Lawrence: 45 languages including Polish, Spanish, Hindi, Hungarian  
 Princeton: 41 languages including Spanish, Mandarin, French, Korean  
 Trenton: 33 languages including Spanish, Haitian Creole French, Arabic  
 West Windsor-Plainsboro: 43 languages including Mandarin, Telugu, Spanish, Hindi<sup>30</sup>

Statistics show some correlation between low English proficiency and low income. Districts with more LEP students are also likely to enroll more low-income students. Trenton is an extreme example: schools there enroll more than half of Mercer's LEP students and the majority of those who are low-income.

### Some Schools Skirt Bilingual Education

Schools in Mercer County offer either English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (taught in English) or bilingual classes (taught in the student's native language) As elsewhere in the state, ESL programs far outnumber bilingual classes.

Until this year, schools in Hopewell never had more than nine students classified as Limited English Proficiency in any grade level. This meant that the schools could offer instruction with regular reading specialists, rather than ESL-certified instructors. In 2007-08, however, exemplifying the trend in Mercer County, Hopewell has 19 ESL students. Now, for the first time,



according to Rafael Meulener, Supervisor of World Language for the district, Hopewell is providing a full ESL program.

Districts with larger immigrant populations can circumvent the federal bilingual mandate by filing for waivers annually with the U.S. Department of Education. Hamilton has several language groups with far more than the 20 students required to make bilingual education mandatory. But Suzanne Diszler, Curriculum Supervisor for the Hamilton School District, explains that because these students are spread across 23 schools, the district is allowed to offer only ESL rather than bilingual classes as federal law would seem to require.

In Princeton, 160 students in six schools and 13 grades require special language assistance. Currently, just one of the district's four elementary schools offers a bilingual program. The others get by with a waiver and ESL instruction.

Three districts receive additional state support to accommodate the needs of non-native English speakers. Trenton, Princeton and Hightstown all employ special teams of bilingual social workers or psychologists to work with students who speak Indian languages such as Gujarati and Punjabi, as well as those who speak only Spanish.

Often, language help is not enough. Dropout rates for Latino students in some Mercer districts exceed those of natives by a factor of four. In Mercer and beyond, a disturbing achievement gap divides LEP students and their classmates.<sup>31</sup> One reason, some experts say, might be that immigrant children often enter kindergarten without having attended high-quality pre-school programs. Without data on preschool enrollment by ethnicity and race, it is not possible to assess the extent to which ethnic minorities or immigrants are accessing existing preschool programs.

### **Language and Language Education**

Learning English is critical for immigrants. English speakers have an easier time with housing, financial dealings, schools and other issues that come into play in daily life. English fluency is also a skill immigrants can take to the bank. Even those with limited English are paid from 13 to 24 percent more than those not English-proficient.<sup>32</sup>

Nationally, the need for language training exceeds the supply of qualified teachers. According to a recent national study, states on average need to add 30 million hours of language training for non-native speakers. But New Jersey lags further behind. To meet the current need, experts estimate that New Jersey would need to add 60 million hours of instruction for ESL students.<sup>33</sup>

Funding is a major problem. Beginning in July 2007, New Jersey invested \$15.6 million in Federal Workforce Investment Act Title II funds in adult basic skills/English as a Second Language/civics education classes. Of this, \$3.2 million was earmarked for integrated ESL and civics courses. Only a fraction will make its way to Mercer. Likewise, between July 1, 2006, and June 30, 2007, state Labor and Workforce Development Department funding in Mercer County made it possible for 638 persons to receive ESL instruction through Workforce Investment Act funds. Mercer residents accounted for just three percent of those who received this training statewide, losing out to counties with higher concentrations of immigrants. Translation services are not available at Mercer County's only One Stop Center, which is located in Trenton.

Availability of language classes is scattershot. Courses such as those offered at Mercer County Community College, various municipal libraries and nonprofit organizations tend to be expensive, ad hoc or otherwise inaccessible. A recent assessment by Mercer County's Literacy Consortium, a collaboration initiated by the county's Workforce Investment Board with partners including Latinas Unidas of Trenton and the Immigration and Refugee Program of Lutheran Social Ministries of New Jersey, concluded that in the county, "programs for the ESL population have fallen through the cracks."<sup>34</sup> A 2008 "Resource Guide for Adult English Language Learners of New Jersey," produced by the Departments of Education and Community Affairs in English and Spanish, marks a step in the right direction, listing the types, cost and restrictions of ESL programs in each county.

### **State College Tuition Policy**

An added degree of frustration may afflict economically disadvantaged immigrant families. Some students achieve academic success in high school only to find that if they lack proper documentation to live in United States they must pay out-of-state tuition rates at New Jersey public colleges and universi-

ties. In one case profiled by *The New York Times*,<sup>35</sup> a young man at Trenton Central High School, class valedictorian and a star soccer player who earned a perfect score in the Advance Placement calculus exam and had taken advanced math classes at Princeton University, wound up working in a pizza shop because he could not afford college. As an undocumented immigrant, federal rules barred him from receiving financial aid, pushing the cost of college out of reach.

He is far from alone. Each year, about 28,000 undocumented students statewide scrape together funds to pay out-of-state rates at public institutions. Local organizations such as the Princeton Regional Scholarship Foundation and Latina Women's Council of Mercer County raise money primarily to assist these students.

Since 2003, a measure that would change New Jersey law to charge undocumented state residents in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities has languished in the Legislature. California, Texas, New York and Illinois, states with higher concentrations of immigrants than New Jersey, are among the 10 that have such laws.

## CONCLUSION

The effects of immigration on Mercer County go far beyond dry U.S. Census Bureau statistics. It's no exaggeration to say that immigration touches the vast majority of Mercer County residents in everyday ways whether they realize it or not.

Perhaps they themselves, like Madhvi or Jorge, are immigrants. Even if they were born in the United States, their colleagues at work might have come from Guatemala or China. Neighbors may speak unfamiliar languages, or fill the air with smells of unfamiliar foods at summer cookouts.

If they or a loved one falls sick, the nurse who cares for them may be from the Philippines, and the doctor from India.

Immigration comes with a host of often highly charged issues involving culture, language and striking a balance between assimilation and pride in native heritage. Around the nation, some politicians bluster about deporting 12 million residents from the United States, while radio talk-show hosts demand that the nation's borders be sealed. And meaningful guidance or coherent policies are largely absent at the national or state level.

But the response in Mercer often is inspiring. Across the county, teachers and social workers, union officials and corporate human relations executives, church leaders and municipal officials and staffs of nonprofits endeavor on their own to work through complex problems that can split families, leave children deprived of an adequate education or affect public health throughout the area.

Most of all, of course, the story of immigration in Mercer County is the story of the immigrants themselves. Even more than for the native-born, life for them often is difficult and confusing — and sometimes painful. There are successes, and tragedies. Some buy their own restaurants or landscaping businesses and start the climb up the economic ladder. Others, after years of discipline and hard work to build an impressive resume in high school, find themselves shut out of state colleges because undocumented immigrants must pay out-of-state tuition rates.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of all is the sense that the changes under way today, in Mercer County and across the nation, are real and historic. It is impossible to imagine what America — and Mercer County — would be like today without the skills, drive and creativity of earlier generations of immigrants from Germany and Ireland, from Italy and China, from Central Europe and Russia.

Today, a new generation of immigrants — from Guatemala and Ecuador, from the Philippines and China, from Haiti and Poland — is writing a chapter in American history. They are writing it every day, in communities across Mercer County, New Jersey and the nation.

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